

Viewpoint

by Daniel S. Goldin
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Recently I was asked what were my favorite moments at NASA. Without hesitation, I said: fixing the Hubble Space Telescope and successfully landing Pathfinder on Mars. My least favorite moment came less than a week after America celebrated the 30th anniversary of our landing on the Moon, when I learned NASA's budget was being cut by \$1.4 billion.

If the funding is not restored, NASA's ability to explore the universe will be irreparably damaged. But the loss will be more than just science. What worries me most is the effect it could have on America, as well as on the morale of the people who work on our nation's space program.

NASA's achievements symbolize what is best about our nation. NASA's employees, contractors and academic partners characterize the best in American ingenuity. They have led a technological revolution that will mark this century as distinctly as the Industrial Revolution marked the previous century.

If NASA symbolizes the best about our country, as I believe, there is a terrible irony here. Year after year, NASA has been recognized for doing more with smaller budgets and is held up as a model of good government.

NASA employees go to work doing what many said was impossible and taking us to places others said were unreachable. In today's red-hot, high-tech job market, they could easily find jobs paying more money and requiring less work. But they don't.

That's because they know how important NASA is to America's future. They know the economic health of the next generation depends on what they do today.

I am extremely proud to lead such an outstanding team. But my pride is matched by my frustration at the message being sent to NASA and its employees.

Today we are in a position we've never been in before. Less than two months from the next fiscal year, we face a potentially harmful cut. Earlier this year, I testified before Congress that NASA's budget was nearing its breaking point. I stated that NASA might need additional funding in upcoming years to reduce the cost of access to space, sustain our high level of safety, and develop future technologies.

While I understand there are many interests competing for limited federal dollars, I have confidence that when Congress returns from its August recess it will restore our budget,

recognizing the tremendous economic, technological and inspirational returns the NASA investment yields.

Over the past five years, NASA's annual budget has been trimmed by about one billion dollars and our buying power cut by about one-third. Our workforce has decreased by almost one-third, without any forced layoffs. Still, NASA turned back \$35 billion from its earlier budget plans, we increased productivity substantially, and we launched a new planetary mission every eleven weeks compared to two missions launched in the previous decade.

NASA's missions represent tangible acts and vivid moments when our country's hopes and dreams take wing, and together we soar to new heights. What better recent example of this is there than Pathfinder?

On the Fourth of July in 1997, NASA's mission to Mars gave the United States a birthday present we're still celebrating – and learning from. Following the landing, people logged onto the Pathfinder Internet site to learn more about the Red Planet. The number of visits to this site now stands at nearly one billion.

Unless these cuts are reversed, future NASA missions, like those planned for Mercury, Pluto and comets, may never leave Earth, much less the drawing board. Some missions may be cancelled outright. Every NASA facility likely would feel the impact. With all that NASA means to the aerospace industry, to the economy, and to America's pioneering spirit, the cuts would be devastating.

Apollo was an inspiration and a catalyst for innovation for an entire generation. We spent nearly five percent of the federal budget to do it. Today, the NASA team spends less than one percent of the federal budget to unravel mysteries of the universe, understand our global climate, improve aviation safety and bring benefits back to Earth. What legacy will we leave the next generation if we fail to make this investment in their future?

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